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ABSTRACT

The reading program developed at Niagara University in New York has undergone a number of changes in response to long term evaluation. In the early 1970s, the only program evaluation tools used were pretests and posttests. These were misleading, as they measured only short term gains, not retention after completion of the course. Based on ideas from J. Roueche and J. Snow's book, "Overcoming Learning Problems," program administrators instituted a change in evaluative criteria to a three-semester follow-up on basic skills students. Through this procedure, one semester of reading and up to two years of reading level growth were found to be insufficient, so a three-semester reading and study skills course was developed that showed a follow-up retention rate of 88%. A larger program that included writing, math, and tutoring was created based on this success. It was found that by using grade point average as a new placement device, up to 300 special admissions and regular students could be handled by program counselors with ease. This also assisted faculty and administration in interpreting student placement and achievement data. Other improvements included more reliable test instruments, computer assisted instruction, and texts for freshmen that were selected on the basis of readability. As a full measure of evaluation, retention rate to graduation was found to be 54%, including transfers, against a national base of 50% of entering freshmen who are expected to graduate. (CRH)

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EVALUATION

OF A

COLLEGE READING PROGRAM

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By June Justice Crawford

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Evaluation of a post-secondary reading program can be a frightening experience for the reading specialist who entered the world of college remedial/developmental reading education as an idealist. Our somewhat naive 1960s beliefs, that we were about to change the world, have been tempered considerably by ten years or more in the field. For most of us, being a reading specialist in a college program has meant being the person the entire campus depends on to produce the miracles. Personal experience in working for a church-related institution certainly confirms the idea that we are called upon to perform supernatural acts. The Learning Center at Niagara University is even physically located in the basement of the chapel! This has not, however, enabled me or my staff to become eligible for sainthood. Nor has it helped to remove the incessant nagging thought that perhaps what we are trying to do is impossible; that trying to create college students from some of the woefully underprepared students who enter our classrooms is an exercise in futility.

Working as the director of a Learning Center, and thus accepting the administrative responsibility for the evaluation of what we do, has had a tremendous impact on my views about remedial/developmental education programs. I no longer expect miraculous results with every student, for

I recognize the limitations of staff, space, finances, and, in many cases, the raw material - the students with whom we work. But, because of this adjustment to reality, the problem of evaluating a program has become a challenge instead of a fear. A meaningful evaluation requires a realistic yardstick, and the current method we use at Niagara is just that. It has taken some trial and error to arrive at this point, however.

Throughout the field of college reading, in the early 1970s, the common method of judging the validity of a reading course was to pre- and post-test the students enrolled. Assuming one could expect a one month growth for one month of instruction, it was a fairly simple procedure to explain the benefits of the instruction. When a class met for four months, and the student exhibited one year of growth on the post-test, convincing the college administration of our worth was an easy task. Many students made such remarkable gains that the reporting of pre- and post-test average class scores became a useful way to convince those in authority. These short-term gains, however, did much to encourage the Miracle Worker image of reading specialists. In fact, many of our colleagues in reading began to believe their own reports, and to dismiss any misgivings about actual student progress in college as being beyond our responsibility. As late as 1977, my classes' average gain in one semester was still my major

concern, and was the measure used by the administration, at the college where I was employed, to determine whether or not my teaching had made a difference.

Unfortunately, basking in the glory of my students' growth lasted just about as long as the time spent basking in the summer sun. Each fall I would go back to teach only to find that some of the students who had done well in my course were nowhere to be seen on campus, as they had failed other academic courses and been dismissed, or become discouraged, and left voluntarily. Other reading instructors had the same experience, and we would sometimes console one another by discussing the progress of the students as a long-term benefit outside the world of education. "Well," we would say, "at least when he gets a job, he will be better prepared for the reading required." Sometimes, in my more rational moments, this reading teacher would wonder how many students were lost each semester. But it wasn't really my problem: that was still the administration's worry.

Then, this teacher became the director of a Learning Center, an administrator. This made me responsible for determining the success rate (the anticipated miracles) of our program. Funding was provided by the University and three outside agencies. The agencies and the University were willing to accept growth in reading as the major criterion for judging our success. However, a new

publication had appeared that changed the view of many. John Roueche and Jerry Snow wrote, in Overcoming Learning Problems,(1) that remedial/developmental programs should not be judged on pre-post-test scores alone. They suggested, instead, that the Learning Center should do three semester follow-ups on students enrolled in basic skills courses. This seemed a logical approach so, in addition to pre- and post-testing our students, we began to keep a record of each student's progress by semester. Pre-test scores were posted on a form, and each semester the courses taken and the final QPA were entered in the record. It only took two semesters to determine that offering one semester of reading was not enough. In one semester, we could often increase the score on a reading test by two years, but if the student began below ninth grade reading level, even two years growth didn't produce a reading achievement level needed for success at a four-year institution. Adjustments were made in our course structure, and we began to offer two levels of reading. This helped to improve our retention rate, but although students were staying in school longer, they still needed more instruction in reading and study skills. After providing much of this on a one-to-one basis, we finally introduced a third semester course into the sequence. Our success rate improved. By the time the University was evaluated by our accrediting agency, in 1981, we were able

to show that students who successfully completed our courses were staying in college for at least three semesters at a rate of eighty-eight percent. This success rate allowed our reading component to enjoy a two-year period of esteem at the University and among our colleagues in other New York State colleges. It was easy to dismiss the worry about unsuccessful students because we could feel we had saved a large enough percentage to justify our existence. Our program was accepted; our three course sequence appeared to be working.

Up to this point, we had worked almost exclusively with only students admitted through a special admissions program. Very few regularly admitted students enrolled. Regular enrollments soon increased, however, as we were successful in obtaining funding support from the federal government, through a Title III Grant. The grant provided additional staff, equipment, training opportunities, and the money needed to develop a university-wide placement test program which was implemented in the summer of 1982. Since then, enrollments increased again, and we now have about 300 students voluntarily enrolled in our reading classes each year.

Title III placed heavy demands on us for evaluation. Every six months we turned out a progess report. Reading scores, three-semester follow-ups, and expected results were sent to Washington, D.C. John Roueche and Lynn

Burnham, of the University of Texas at Austin, served as consultants to our program. We developed new programs in writing and math, added fulltime and parttime teaching staff, and developed a complete tutoring program. We moved into computer assisted instruction, honed our test instruments to provide greater reliability for placement suggestions, and did readability studies on all freshman-level texts.

This work enabled us to determine distinct cut-off points for entrance to our reading classes. Now, in addition to instructor judgment, and instead of percentile bands on tests, we accepted the suggestion of Dr. Roueche that we use the Nelson Denny Reading Test, Forms E and F for our placement test and our post-test in reading classes. Administratively, this was a good decision. Similar to most other colleges, Niagara has experienced the problem of accepting more and more students who are not academically well-prepared for college. Having the grade point averages as cut-off points for our classes makes it easier for administrators and academic advisors to understand our system of placement. But, more importantly, it has allowed us to report testing results accurately and in terms the faculty can understand. We can tell them the reading level of an entering student, and suggest the number of semesters of reading instruction which we feel will be necessary.

For evaluation purposes, this is useful information. If our three-semester success rate declines, it is now possible to suggest the revision of admission standards, to relate our lower success rate to the type of students entering the University, and to discuss in our staff meetings the problem of revising our courses to meet these students' needs. Materials purchased, classroom operation, and the curriculum can all be viewed in light of our knowledge about students. University personnel can better understand our dilemma when we are able to point out the relationship between lower reading ability in entering students and a lower success rate in our program. This form of evaluation alone provides the impetus for constant review of our curriculum and our staffing needs.

A drop in our retention rate for three semesters, from eighty-eight to seventy-seven percent frustrated those of us involved in our program. The drop in retention appeared to be caused by larger enrollments and an increase in the number of student advisors, many of whom did not understand the need for more than one semester of remediation. We saw a necessity for stronger support services if we were to convince students of the value of a three course sequence. Also, many students who entered our courses were regularly admitted, but they required the services of a special advisor just as much as our special admission students. By comparing the success rates for the two groups, we were

able to approach our administration and request the services of an advisor for any student whose test results indicate a basic skills need in three academic areas. This now allows us to work closely with one or two people instead of having to follow-up with every faculty advisor on campus.

The third major change in our evaluation process began when the Roueche and Snow idea of three semesters didn't seem to provide any guarantee of final success at a four-year institution. We were teaching these students for three semesters at the same time they were enrolled in regular college courses. As long as we saw the students in our classes, helped them with study techniques for the course, and guided them to tutors, we could maintain the students. Once they left our department, however, it was difficult to know how they were doing. Though we saw some of them graduate each year, others had apparently disappeared before they completed their programs. It seemed the more students we enrolled in our classes, the more problematical the follow-up became.

Computerized records would, of course, be the ideal situation. However, our staff just doesn't have time to enter data, cross-check it with University files, and run printouts. And, our University does not have an evaluation department. Whatever we do has to be simple, and not too time consuming. But it has to convince me that we are

achieving a measure of success so I can sell our program to the administration. What measure of success is acceptable?

Some years ago, in an article about non-credit reading courses, James Shepherd pointed out that only the lowest achieving freshmen are enrolled in our reading and study skills classes. Therefore, he said:

> To say such students drop out of school is only to say that a very large percentage of all college freshmen drop out of school; to say they do not do well in college courses is only to say that the lowest-achieving college freshmen are the lowest achieving college freshmen. (2)

Shepherd was arguing for credit for study skills courses, but in a side comment he suggested that average and above-average freshmen might benefit even more than low achievers from such a course. Rereading this article made me consider the students who enroll in our Critical Reading course and, beyond that, our Study Skills course. Our success rate with students has always been highest with students who enter college reading at at least ninth grade level. This information is a useful part of evaluation because it is possible to suggest to the Deans and the Admissions Department that they should plan to take only a small number of students under ninth grade level. In this way, we can devote the greatest amount of our time to teaching the students we know we can retain.

Finally, we made the decision to evaluate our reading

program, as scary as it was, on the basis of retention to graduation as the major criterion. Shepherd's suggestion that a large percentage of students drop out of a college created the idea for the plan we now follow. Instead of attempting to do a semester-by-semester record of every student enrolled in our courses, we now do two things that do not require extraordinary amounts of time, but which provide the data we need.

First, at the end of every semester, the instructors of reading classes turn in a xerox copy of the final grade rosters, for our files. We are only interested in those students who successfully completed the course. An alphabetical list is kept in our files, by academic year. Each semester it is a simple task to check the rosters on successive reading courses to see if the students were enrolled and what the final grade was. After the three courses are completed, the file is put away until the year in which we can expect the students would graduate.

In the second stage, we use the list to determine, from the registrar's record of all students enrolled, how many of the students are still in college. For the remaining students, we check progress toward degree, quality point average, and anticipated graduation date. Those who do graduate - whether in four years or five - are counted and figured in our success rate. Thus, if seventy-seven percent are still with us after three

semesters, we can find out how many we lose after that. Once we have a final percentage rate for graduated students, we can then judge our success.

At present, we are using the national figures for successful completion of a four year degree program as our guide. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "for every 100 students in the fifth grade in 1972, forty-six entered college in 1980." Of this number, it is projected, "twenty-three are likely to earn a bachelor's degree in 1984." (3)

In our current projections, we have forty-six percent of the students who successfully completed our courses ready to graduate this year. Of the entire group originally enrolled, we know which students withdrew or were dismissed academically. In our follow-up on those who withdrew we found they had transferred to other schools and were expected to graduate this year. That brings our success rate to fifty-four percent of the original students. These students entered college reading between seventh and ninth grade levels. They all completed our program at 12.5 grade level or better.

If only fifty percent of entering freshmen in 1980 are expected to graduate, and we expect to graduate, either from Niagara or elsewhere, fifty-four percent, we feel we are successful. We are matching national figures while working with the students originally judged least likely to

succeed.

In 1950, Helen Robinson said, "Academic performance is clearly the sine qua non for the validation of remedial courses....In the final analysis remedial instruction must necessarily stand or fall on the basis of this single criterion." (4)

For us, at Niagara, academic performance should lead to graduation. We feel it can be at least partially attributed to our reading program. And it is a wonderful way to judge ourselves. An evaluation method that suggests a fifty-four percent success rate for our classes, or a rate that matches the expected rate of graduation from colleges all over the country, can make evaluation seem like fun instead of something to be feared. Perhaps, we'll stay in the basement of the chapel after all!

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